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SHREKTAKULAR!

AS THE LONG-AWAITED ARRIVAL OF EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE OGRE HITS THE WEST END, **JO CAIRD** FINDS OUT HOW THE STAR CAST FEEL ABOUT TAKING ON SUCH WELL-LOVED ROLES

YOU'D HAVE TO HAVE BEEN LIVING in a swamp to miss the news of *Shrek the Musical's* imminent arrival in the West End. The show, based on the DreamWorks animated film, opens in London following a Broadway run in 2008 that was nominated for eight Tony Awards, including best musical, book and score, with British designer Tim Hatley taking the gong for best costume design.

The story of the misanthropic ogre who sets off on a mission to rescue the beautiful and feisty Princess Fiona from a fire-breathing dragon, only to fall in love with her along the way, reportedly cost \$24 million to stage in the USA. The London version, says Nigel Lindsay, who is donning the lumpy green suit to take on the title role, will be no less extravagant: 'It's a multi-million dollar musical so you're going to get all the smoke and bangs and whistles from a fantastic spectacle'.

Lindsay, last seen on stage in Arthur Miller's *Broken Glass* at The Tricycle, is joined by Amanda Holden as Princess Fiona, Richard Blackwood as Shrek's ever-vocal companion Donkey, and Nigel Harman as the diminutive baddie, Prince Farquaad. Lindsay acknowledges that the directors, Rob Ashford and Jason Moore (whose

Avenue Q ran for five years in the West End), made some unusual choices when it came to casting the show.



Lindsay, for example, is a highly experienced stage and screen actor, but Shrek is only the second musical theatre role he has taken on, following his debut as Nathan Detroit in *Guys and Dolls* in 2005, opposite Harman's Sky Masterson. Harman too, despite beginning his career in musical theatre, is best known for his roles in straight drama and TV; Olivier Award-nominee Holden has spent the last few years focusing mainly on presenting; and Richard Blackwood's acting career has, up to this point, played second fiddle to his comedy.

All four stars are enthusiastic fans of the film. For Lindsay, who has two young daughters, *Shrek* is 'one of those films that adults and kids can watch and both

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get as much enjoyment from ... you have the buddy-buddy stuff and the romance, but also a great big fairytale and a farting, burping ogre, so the kids are in heaven too'. The tone of *Shrek's* humour is also very important, explains Lindsay: 'I think it was Jeffrey Katzenberg from DreamWorks who said, "Britain is the home for *Shrek*".'

Shrek the Musical may be the only West End show ever to feature a gassy ogre, a smartarse donkey and a midget monarch, but it terms of genre, it is hardly unique: screen-to-stage musicals have dominated London's theatre scene for years. Some of the West End's most popular shows were adapted from feature films, including *Billy Elliot*, *Dirty Dancing* and *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, as well as this year's Olivier Award winner, *Legally Blonde*.

British audiences certainly have a lot of time for musicals adapted from movies, but there's no magic formula when it comes

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to making a success of them. Perhaps the biggest challenge of this type of work is striking the balance between being true to the original and creating a piece of theatre with dramatic integrity in its own right. It was listening to Jeanine Tesori and David Lindsay-Abaire's score that convinced Harman that *Shrek* was a project he wanted to be involved with. It isn't 'just a generic film musical', he says, 'but a musical that will stand alone regardless of the film'. Accepting the part of Prince Farquaad, therefore, 'really was a no-brainer'.



King of stage and swamp:
Nigel Lindsay in his challenging new role as Shrek

Joan Marcus

For Blackwood, the musical's book was what stood out when he was initially approached about the show: 'Straight away it jumped out at me that I'm going to have fun doing this. I'm laughing at a line, but I'm also laughing at the thought of how I'm going to deliver it. And those are the best scripts'.

Hugely important to the success or failure of screen-to-stage adaptations are individual actors' decisions about how to bring well-loved film characters to life while making them their own. Lindsay is keen to stress that, 'I'm playing my Shrek, not Mike Myers's Shrek. I'm starting from scratch'. Holden too is aware of the comparisons that will undoubtedly be made between her portrayal of Princess Fiona and that of Cameron Diaz, but the British actress remains un-intimidated.

'The interesting thing about playing Princess Fiona,' she explains, 'is that although

Cameron Diaz has played it, you didn't see her, you only heard her. So I don't see that I'm stepping into Cameron Diaz's (probably) size 9 shoes. She's a goddess and very tall and I'm a small munchkin by comparison. I feel like she has created a brilliant, feisty, fearless princess and I just have to carry the story on.'

That story is ultimately what will determine how audiences at Theatre Royal Drury Lane respond to *Shrek the Musical*. Harman, for one, is thrilled by the challenge: '[Musical theatre] is a love affair – and a hate affair – if it's not going well, you'll know. But when it's going well, there's no better place to be'.

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SHREK THE MUSICAL, Theatre Royal Drury Lane. Previews from 6 May, opening night 7 June (page 27).



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